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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an integrative theoretical framework for the conceptualization of the marriage relationship in terms of Kelly's psychology of personal constructs. Personal construct theory offers a productive model which can account for research findings related to most of the variables found to be relevant to marital success. Personal construct theory is shown to have merit in providing an integrative model for the assimilation of the various research findings into a meaningful overall context. The theoretical model is further discussed in terms of its implications for the generation of testable hypotheses regarding the marriage relationship. (Author/EK)

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PERSONAL CONSTRUCT THEORY APPLIED TO THE MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIP[1]

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Abstract

This paper presents an integrative theoretical framework for the conceptualization of the marriage relationship in terms of Kelly's psychology of personal constructs. Personal construct theory is shown to offer a productive model which can adequately account for research findings related to most of the variables that have been found to be relevant to marital success: e.g., personality homogamy between spouses, interpersonal understanding between spouses, and role expectations for self and spouse. Moreover, personal construct theory is shown to have the further merit of providing an integrative model for the assimilation of these various research findings in a meaningful overall context. The theoretical model is further discussed in terms of its implications for the generation of testable hypotheses regarding the marriage relationship.

PERSONAL CONSTRUCT THEORY APPLIED TO THE MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIP

Recent reviews of marriage research (Tharp, 1963; Albert, 1967) show there to be a morass of heterogeneous theory and data related to the variable of marital success. Tharp (1963) identifies several main areas of recent research concerning marital interaction and success. Similarly, Hill and Hansen (1960) discuss five broad "conceptual frameworks" utilized in family study, and they observe that despite hundreds of research articles, the development of family theory based upon these findings is very slight indeed. Moreover, there appear to have been no attempts to relate a broad spectrum of research findings on the marital relationship closely to a single, consistent theoretical position.

This paper presents an integrative theoretical framework for the conceptualization of the marriage relationship in terms of Kelly's (1955) psychology of personal constructs. The introductory part of this paper will make some general remarks about Kelly's theory and the nature of personal constructs. Then, it is argued that personal construct theory can adequately account for research findings related to marital success. Personal construct theory is shown to provide an integrative model for the assimilation of these findings in a meaningful overall context. Finally, this theoretical model is discussed in terms of its implications for the generation of testable hypotheses regarding the marriage relationship.

Personal Construct Theory

Kelly's psychology of personal constructs is a "phenomenological" theory in that it stresses the paramount importance of man's perceptions and interpretations of objective events, rather than just these events or "stimuli" themselves, in determining his behavior. In Kelly's view, the perceptual field of the individual is determined by, and consists of, a system of interrelated interpretations of the world or a system of hierarchically organized personal constructs (hereafter: PCs). Man's "core tendency" (Maddi, 1968), according to this theory of personality, is his continual, active attempt to anticipate, predict, and control the events of his experience. The events of a man's life make sense only if he is seen as acting in relation to his interpretations of the past and present and his anticipations of the future. If one wishes to understand human beings and predict their behavior, he must first investigate the personal construct systems of individuals that limit and guide their behavioral interactions. These interactions, in turn, determine such social consequences or outcomes as marital success and happiness.

PCs may be likened to sets of goggles through which a person may view sections of the world. Only a limited section is taken in by any one set or construct, and the "image" it presents may be distorted, thus leading the person to act in inappropriate ways. In general terms a PC may be defined as:

> "...a way in which some things are seen as being alike and yet different from others. A construct is therefore essentially a two-ended affair, involving a particular basis for considering likenesses and differences and at the same time for excluding certain things as irrelevant to the contrast involved (Bannister and Mair, 1968, p. 25).

Examples of some different PCs are: powerful--weak, good--bad, kind--cruel, supports me--doesn't support me, etc. Constructs are seen as interpretations that are imposed upon events, rather than as real properties of the events themselves. They are bipolar, dichotomous bases of discrimination that prove to be more or less useful to the individual in organizing and anticipating the course of events.

It is often contended that Kelly's theory is highly mentalistic and that PCs are purely cognitive entities. Kelly remarks, referring to "the impression that a construct is...highly articulate and cognitive,"

> personal construct theory is no more a cognitive theory than it is an affective or a conative one. There are grounds for distinction that operate in one's life that seem to elude verbal expression. We see them in infants, as well as in our own spontaneous aversions and infatuations...Certainly it is important not to consider a construct as another term for a concept, else a major sector of the arena in which constructs function will be obscured from view (Kelly, 1966, unpublished manuscript quoted in Bannister and Mair, 1968, p. 35).

Elsewhere Kelly (1958) remarks that to talk about constructs is to talk about "psychological process in a living person." The notion of a construct, he says, bears no essential relation to words, language or even consciousness, but"...is simply a psychologically construed unit for understanding human processes." It is true that research has, up to now, focused mainly upon verbalized constructs. But it is important to realize that even these verbalized constructs (e.g. the construct kind--cruel) involve a great deal more than just the classification or organization of events along certain dimensions. In addition, they contain implicit or explicit predictions concerning the behavior of the events or persons who are described as say, kind or cruel.

Moreover, there are different feeling-states and affective judgments associated with the contrasting poles of such constructs. The following description by Bannister and Mair (1968) catches accurately the dynamics of behavior guided by constructs:

> The system of constructs which a person establishes for himself represents the network of pathways along which he is free to move. Each path can be viewed as a two-way street, and while the individual may choose either of these directions, he cannot, so to speak, strike out across country without building new constructions, new routes to follow (p. 27).

A Skeleton Theory of Social Interaction

From his "Fundamental Postulate," that "a person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events," and certain "Corollaries," especially those of Commonality and Sociality, Kelly (1955) derives propositions that provide a skeleton theory of human and social interaction. First of all, the PCs in terms of which a person construes his own self and experiences tightly control and direct his own behavior. Of course, it does not follow from the fact that an individual employs certain PCs in construing his self or experience that he "understands himself" or can accurately construe his own constructions.

Secondly, if two or more people employ similar PCs in construing their experiences, then they have psychologically similar processes and may be expected to behave in a similar manner in similar situations. Thus commonality in psychological processes does not necessarily result from having experienced the same events, but from having construed events, whether or not they were the same, in a similar manner. For example, Kelly views the similarity among individuals of the same culture as essentially a similarity in what they perceive is expected

of them, rather than a result of their having been subjected to similar environmental stimuli.

Finally, social interaction consists in the complicated interplay of roles--roles played in relation to one another by individuals who are engaged in some common enterprise. A person, however, plays a role in a social process involving another person only to the extent that he construes the construction processes or outlook of that other person. Social interaction is based upon the "role constructs" in terms of which individuals, more or less accurately, construe not just the behavior, but the outlook, motives, attitudes, etc., of others. Kelly is very clear that the crux of a productive relationship between persons is their accurate construction and acceptance of one another's outlook or PCs. In his view, commonality in PCs does not ensure that individuals will be able to subsume or construe one another's construction systems. In fact, he proposes that in some instances commonality between individuals, perhaps including their mutual identification with one another, may block understanding. Nevertheless, he does suggest that some minimal commonality may be necessary for successful interaction.

The Measurement of PCs

Although Kelly's theory is highly abstract and addresses itself to a wide range of psychological and behavioral phenomena, it provides, along with theory, an explicit, usable procedure for eliciting the actual role constructs employed by individuals in social interaction. This procedure is called the Role Construct Repertory Test, or Rep test (Kelly, 1955). The repertory grid, a recent development of the

Rep test (different forms of the repertory grid and scoring systems are discussed in Bannister and Mair, 1968), may be briefly described as follows: An individual is provided with cards bearing the names of a number of people (usually about 20) who play different, significant roles in his life. The examiner presents the individual with different "sorts" of three cards or names and asks him to suggest some important way in which two of them are alike and different from the third. For example, two may be called friendly, and the third cold. In this case the test has elicited the construct "friendly--cold." A grid form on squared paper is prepared, with tole titles across the top, one to a column, and constructs down the side, one to a row. Marks in the grid cells indicate the intersection of constructs and role figures. Measures of the relationships between PCs may be derived from the grid. For example, derived mathematical relationships between constructs in the grid may be thought, in some cases, to reflect the psychological structure of the individual's system of PCs. It is important to note that the repertory grid, unlike most psychological tests, enables the examiner simultaneously to 1) elicit "projectively" the unique, individual constructs employed by the subject in spontaneously construing his experience, and 2) obtain reliable, objective measures of the content and structure of PC systems that permit the comparison of individuals in a precise and objective manner.

Implications for Marriage

At this point some of the summary implications of this theoretical perspective for the marriage relationship and its success may be stated. The crux of a successful and satisfying marriage relationship

may be considered to be the extent to which the marriage partners can effectively construe each other's outlook or PCs. Such interpersonal understanding probably involves the accurate assessment of the content of the other's constructs and the ability to predict his or her use of these PCs in construing events central to marriage. A certain basic commonality between the PC systems of the spouses may be necessary in order for mutual understanding to occur. Some differences between spouses may also facilitate marital success. Kelly suggests that sex differences in construction systems may contribute to understanding between a man and woman. A. W. Lanfield (personal communication, 1969) has suggested that the marriage relationship may be enhanced by certain similarities between spouses' PC systems at the content level and certain differences at the organizational level. All of these suppositions concerning commonality in PCs, mutual construction of PCs and marital success may be formulated as hypotheses that can be subjected to empirical investigation.

Application to Previous Findings

The chief argument of this paper is that personal construct theory can most adequately account for many research findings to date related to the variable of marital success. It is also believed that instruments for assessing individuals' PCs can equally well or better assess the variables investigated in these studies. Variables particularly relevant to marital interaction and success would appear to include personality "homogamy" between spouses, including the similarity or convergence of spouses' attitudes and values, understanding between marriage partners, and role expectations for self and mate.

Homogamy

In his comprehensive review of marriage research, Tharp (1963) observes that

> the organizing issue in all mating research has remained the same, namely, the degree of similarity between husbands and wives. That is, do "likes marry likes" (homogamy); or do "unlikes" marry (heterogamy) (p. 97)?"

With regard to the relationship between personality homogamy between spouses and marital success, previous research has shown that spouses' similarity on "unhealthy" or neurotic personality traits is negatively correlated with marital success (Burgess and Wallin, 1953, p. 529; Burchinal, Hawkes, and Gardner, 1957). There is also some indication that spouses' similarity on "healthy" personality traits is positively correlated with marital success (Pickford, Signori, and Remple, 1966). Also, Albert (1967) notes that commonality in attitudes is important in strengthening marital accommodation. The strongest support for the homogamy hypothesis comes from studies in the area of social or interpersonal perception which report positive correlations between scores on measures of marital adjustment and the degree of similarity between spouses' self-ratings on personality traits (Kelly, 1941; Preston, Pelz, Mudd, and Froscher, 1952; Dymond, 1954; and Corsini, 1956).

PC theory would predict that a certain commonality in PCs would be positively associated with marital success. Thus the results of these studies could be explained by arguing that similarity in spouses' PCs or outlooks underlies and determines their similar attitudes and personality traits, and that their similar self-ratings on personality traits reflects their employment of similar PC systems in construing their experience. In almost all these studies, however, the correlations

between homogamy and marital success have been only low to moderate. It is speculated that spouses' personality homogamy may account for more of the variability in marital success than these studies indicate. For example, two marriage partners could share the PC of dominant--submissive. Yet if one were to score (or rate himself) as dominant, and his spouse were to score (or rate herself) as submissive, this would typically be interpreted as an example of the spouses' dissimilarity. The essential congruence of the spouses on the underlying PC would never be noted. Thus traditional personality tests or self-ratings may not reflect the possible homogamy in the manner in which spouses construe their world.

Perhaps the most appropriate level at which to approach this issue is suggested by Rokeach (1968), who suggests that psychologists investigate the relatively few, enduring values held by individuals rather than just the hundreds of attitudes held by them that are easier to identify and manipulate experimentally. These values may be thought of as underlying and determining more ephemeral attitudes, preferences and beliefs in the same sense, as discussed above, that PCs may underlie social or interpersonal perceptions. Keeley (1955) reports a moderate, positive relationship between value convergence of spouses and marital success. His definition of value is very general, however, including what might be called attitudes and preferences as well as basic values. Rokeach defines a value as a single, "central," enduring belief that a certain mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable. A value may be interpreted in terms of PC theory as the preferred pole of a highly "superordinate" PC. A superordinate

construct is a PC that is located high in the individual's hierarchical system, that subsumes other constructs under it, that tends to be one of the constructs guiding the long-term commitments of a man's life, and that is likely to be more stable and resistent to change. Hinkle (1965) has developed a procedure for eliciting a series of increasingly more superordinate role constructs. The preferred poles of the later PCs in this series may be regarded as the principle values of the individual. By using this procedure it should be possible to derive a measure of the commonality of couples' values or highly superordinate PCs relevant to marriage, and to determine the relationship between the extent of this commonality and a measure of marital success.

Understanding

Both common sense and clinical wisdom would suggest that happy couples understand one another better than unhappy couples--understand in the sense of being able to accurately gauge one another's beliefs, evaluations, and actions. For example, Dymond (1954) found that happily married couples predict their spouse's responses to MMPI items pertinent to interaction with others significantly better than unhappily marrieds. Surprisingly, however, most studies (e.g. Preston, et. al., 1952; Corsini, 1956; Udry, Nelson, and Nelson, 1961; Taylor, 1967) that have investigated the relationship between understanding and marital success or related variables have yielded negative results.

According to personal construct theory, the crux of a successful marital relationship should lie in the ability of the marriage partners to effectively construe each other's PCs or outlook, and hence predict

their behavior. This hypothesis could be tested by procedures which measured spouses' ability to predict what PCs the other would use, and how they would use them, in construing certain events and persons relevant to marriage. Predicting the PCs and their use by one's spouse is not the same thing as, though it may overlap with, predicting their responses to MMPI items or self-ratings on personality traits. Measures of elicited PCs related to interpersonal understanding may well prove to correlate more highly with measures of marital success, for PCs have the advantage of tapping construct dimensions that are known to be personally significant to the individuals involved, rather than traits or properties the examiner only assumes are meaningful and pertinent to everyone's marital interaction. In addition, it may be speculated that measures of PCs are more reliable than other instruments employed for this purpose. No information is provided in the above articles concerning the reliability of the ratings of oneself and others. It is not difficult to imagine that perceptions of oneself and others such as "jealous" and "worrying" might fluctuate widely from day to day, whereas the basic construct dimensions employed to describe and evaluate events and persons relevant to marriage are more likely to remain relatively constant over time. Thus PC measures should be particularly useful in investigating understanding and marriage.

Roles and Role Expectations

Corsini's (1956) study showed a positive relationship between marital success and understanding in those cases where the husband was the object of a 50-item Q sort (i.e. the wife's prediction of the husband's self-perception, and the husband's prediction of his wife's

perception of him). Similarly, Taylor (1967) found that "empathic accuracy," measured in a similar manner, is "more significant [for marital adjustment] with respect to perception of the husband than in perceptions of the wife." His results led Corsini to conclude that the husband's role in marriage is the more crucial one for happiness. However, he found these relationships between happiness and understanding were just as true for randomly paired men and women from among the subjects as for the real couples, suggesting that the relevant relationship may exist between marital success and a stereotyped conception of the husband. Tharp (1963) reviews this and other studies which suggest that a crucial factor in marital success is the culturally defined male sex-role or male subrole of husband. He defines such studies as describing a "role-analysis approach" to marriage research.

In discussing the role-analysis approach, Tharp, drawing upon Parsons and Bayles' (1955) theory of marriage relationships, suggests that

> the marriage relationship can be considered as a stimulus situation comprised of expectations specific to marriage. These marriage roles can thus be expected to order (or even assign) the operative needs of the individuals concerned (p. 114).

An investigation conducted almost 20 years ago by Ort (1950) shows how promising this approach to marital success may be. Ort reported a correlation of -.83 between individual spouses' self report measures of marital happiness and their "conflict scores," reflecting the number of conflicts revealed in a structured interview between an individual's role expectations for himself and his spouse and the roles actually played by them. PC theory would appear to be highly relevant to this

line of thought and investigation. Role expectations specific to marriage would be interpreted as portions of a system of role constructs employed by an individual in the anticipation and evaluation of events in the area of marital interaction. In other words, role expectations and roles played in marriage consist of and are determined by an individual's role constructs or PCs. Following are some of the aspects of such systems of PCs relevant to the question of role conflicts in marriage: 1) the content of the PCs in terms of which the spouses construe their own selves and experiences, which guide and limit their behavior; 2) the extent to which the individual spouses can adequately construe their own constructions or "understand themselves" and their anticipations regarding marriage; 3) the content of the PCs in terms of which the spouses construe each other's behavior and construction systems, which determine their behavioral interactions; 4) the degree of accuracy of the spouses constructions of one another's PCs; and 5) certain aspects of the organization of the spouses' PC systems, such as their consistency and ambiguity, which in various ways affect their ability to effectively construe one another's outlooks and relate productively to one another. Hypotheses that admit of empirical test could be formulated regarding the manner in which these factors affect marriage roles and performances.

Other Concepts

In a similar manner it can be argued that PC theory can encompass and explain other variables, such as agreement of the connotative meaning of marriage-related concepts (Katz, 1965) and mutual identification between spouses (Kimmel and Havens, 1966), that have been shown

or suggested to be pertinent to marital interaction and success. For example, Katz found that happily married spouses, compared with unhappily marrieds, show greater agreement in affective judgement or connotative meaning on concepts relevant to marriage. The 12 polar adjective scales making up the semantic differential used in this study would be interpreted in terms of PC theory as PC dimensions employed in the description and evaluation of events relevant to marriage. Instruments for the elicitation and measurement of PCs could tap these same variables of connotative agreement and disagreement. In fact, it might be argued that PC measures could be derived that would be more sensitive to existing similarity or difference of connotative meaning between spouses. The polar adjective scales used in Katz's study were chosen on the basis of their factor loadings in previous research. These scales may be more or less relevant to a particular couple, while methods for eliciting PCs have the advantage of tapping construct dimensions known to be significant in this area to the particular couple involved. Moreover, PC measures, unlike the semantic differential procedure, are able to take into account the fact that spouses may employ <u>different construct dimensions</u> in responding to concepts or events pertinent to marriage, as well as respond differentially along the dimensions given by the study (Weigel and Weigel, 1969).

In summary, personal construct theory appears to be able to account for previously investigated variables related to marital adjustment and success, and to integrate these variables in a single, meaningful, overall context. At the same time, this theoretical framework is more explicit and well-developed than many of the loosely organized

conceptual frameworks that have guided previous studies. Also, since this framework is also a theory of personality that tries to say something about the fundamental and universal characteristics of human personality and social interaction, it is more abstract and broadly applicable. Finally, we may note that the wide variety of instruments used in previous studies (e.g. MMPI scales, lists of personality traits, etc.) often bear only a loose connection with the conceptual framework employed in the studies, or the specific hypotheses being tested. Instruments for the assessment of PCs, on the other hand, which are highly versatile, are closely related to personal construct theory and are derived from it for exactly the purpose of measuring aspects of individual's PC systems.

Deriving Testable Hypotheses

In addition to the advantages of being able to integrate previous findings, there is the possibility of deriving testable hypotheses regarding marital interaction directly from a personality theory, i.e. Kelly's psychology of personal constructs. Hypotheses have been derived from the theory and tested regarding the therapeutic relationship, which might be thought to be analogous to the relationship between spouses in marriage. Lanfield and Nawas (1964) and Lanfield and Ourth (1965) examined the relationship between the degree of convergence of therapist and client PCs and success in psychotherapy, finding a positive relationship between these variables. Although the results were obscured by methodological difficulties, a preliminary investigation of the relationship between congruence of spouses' PCs and reported marital success has been presented by the authors (Weigel, Weigel, and Richardson, 1969).

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